

Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department Sewage-Detecting Dog Project, 2008

Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department undertook a pilot project in 2008 to explore the use of a tracking dog in identifying failing septic systems. The tracking dog, Shadow, was first trained to detect surfacing sewage and then, along with Shadow's handler and a Health Department staff person, performed shoreline walks along the Wauna shoreline, Rocky Bay, and Burley Lagoon. On the first shoreline walk, along the Wauna shoreline, Shadow identified a known site with surfacing sewage effluent and it appeared that using Shadow would be an effective way of identifying failing systems. However, Shadow did not detect any additional problems in future walks and follow-up work along the Wauna shoreline by health department staff identified a number of problems that Shadow didn't detect. This was a very limited project and didn't have the resources to fully explore the capabilities of using a dog to identify failing septic systems. The conclusion reached was that a dog could identify a failing septic system in complete failure, with untreated surfacing sewage, but that significant training of a dog would likely be necessary before the dog could detect failures with partially treated sewage.

For additional information, contact Ray Hanowell, Environmental Health Specialist, at (253) 798-2845 or ghanowell@tpchd.org